references to their Irish heritage with items such as “Irish nachos” and “Paddy melt.”

In the 1990s, interest in Irish cultural traditions exploded with the worldwide success of the dance and music show “Riverdance” (starring Chicago’s own Michael Flatley, whose family owned a pub for many years on South Western Ave.). Since that time, several restaurants and pubs have expanded their Irish concept beyond their name to include more traditional fare in their menus.

Chicago establishments where Irish classics are likely to be found include Chief O’Neill’s Pub and Restaurant and The Abbey Pub, both in the Avondale neighborhood; The Galway Arms in Lincoln Park; Fado, downtown; Mrs. Murphy’s Irish Bistro in North Center; and the Curragh, with locations on the Northwest Side and in the suburbs. Other suburban outposts of quintessentially Irish fare include The Kerry Piper in Willowbrook, The Irish Times in Brookfield, and Tommy Nevin’s Pub, with locations in Evanston, Naperville, and Frankfort.

Two main Irish cultural institutions serve as meeting places for Chicago’s North Side and South Side Irish populations. Located in a refurbished Chicago public school, the Irish American Heritage Center in Mayfair hosts Irish cultural events and dinners along with food in the pub. On the Far South Side, Gaelic Park in Tinley Park also offers food, drink, and cultural events, along with traditional Irish sporting competitions such as Gaelic football.

Not surprisingly, given the dearth of true Irish cuisine, the fare in all of these establishments includes many of the same dishes. The food is heavy on meat and potatoes, with occasional fish dishes (fish and chips and lots of salmon, partly because of its general popularity among American diners but also because it is plentiful in Irish rivers). Oysters and mussels are common, owing to their abundance in the waters off Ireland’s coasts.

Other popular dishes associated with Irish cuisine include bangers and mash (mild pork sausages served over mashed potatoes), beef and Guinness stew (classic beef stew is made Irish with the addition of Guinness stout, a night-black porter brewed in Dublin), bridies (ground, seasoned meat encased in a pastry crust, found more often at festivals than in pubs and restaurants), shepherd’s pie (casserole-style dish of ground meat in a savory sauce over cooked carrots and peas, topped with mashed potatoes), and soda bread. Corned beef and cabbage, perhaps the single dish most associated with the Irish, is not an Irish dish. The Irish would have eaten bacon and cabbage instead, using bacon cured from the loin rather than the belly. In Ireland, beef typically was costlier than pork. Irish immigrants started using corned beef when bacon, prohibited by kosher laws, was not available in Jewish delis in crowded New York.

While many Irish emigrated with few yearnings for native foodstuffs, there are items that Irish transplants still crave. Barry’s Tea, Bird’s Custard (a powdered, egg-free custard mix), and McCann’s Irish Oatmeal are just a few items that, through globalization and relaxed trade regulations, are now available at many chain grocers, but once were available only through Irish importer shops. For years, places such as The Irish Shop in suburban Oak Park and Gaelic Imports on West Gunnison, were the only options for homesick immigrants to find the flavors of home.

While items such as tea and powdered custard travel well, meat is harder to transport across the ocean. Fortunately, Chicago boasts two sausage factories that produce, among other things, traditional “bangers” that are beloved across Ireland. Since 1967, Winston’s Sausages on the South Side, founded by County Roscommon, Ireland, native, Michael Winston Sr., has been providing sausages, corned beef, black and white puddings, and other Irish foods to patrons yearning for a taste of home. In 1983, Galway native John Diamond began a wholesale sausage business, and his products are available in many restaurants and groceries.

At the start of the third millennium, Irish food is not difficult to find in Chicago. Truthfully, however, as food influences from around the world find their way into restaurant kitchens across Ireland, Ireland’s cuisine is changing, and it’s quite possible that Irish food in Chicago is as much Chicago as it is Irish.

Contributor: James P. DeWan
See also: Bars, Taverns, Saloons, and Pubs

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Italian Beef

The Italian Beef sandwich, or simply “beef,” is an iconic dish for Chicagoans. It enjoys enormous popularity as a quick meal in fast-food restaurants throughout the area, most particularly in “beef stands.” It also is commonly featured in buffet-style meals at celebratory gatherings, such as birthday parties, either catered by restaurants or prepared at home. Italian beef is also offered at lunch in many sit-down restaurants, especially those featuring Italian American food.
GIARDINIERA

Order a “Beef, hot” and chances are your sandwich will be topped with a few spoonfuls of a spicy vegetable relish. Though giardiniera isn’t unique to Chicago—it’s often called giardiniera sottaceto in Italy—the condiment has established a foothold here like nowhere else in the country, largely because of its association with Italian beef. Most recipes call for chopped vegetables—often including fresh green chilies (sometimes supplemented with crushed dried red peppers), celery, cauliflower, or carrots—to be salt brined or pickled in vinegar and then submerged in vegetable oil. Variations abound: some versions are fresh and crunchy while others are fermented and softer; texture can be chunky or fine; and heat levels range from mild to challenging. Many beef stands prepare their own giardiniera, but plenty of locally packed brands can be found. A well-stocked supermarket or Italian delicatessen might carry a dozen or more varieties.

—PETER ENGLER

Both the method of cooking the meat and the manner of serving the sandwich are essential to the authenticity of a proper “beef.” The meat typically is seasoned with dry herbs (oregano, basil) and spices (red pepper, black pepper, sometimes nutmeg or cloves) and fresh garlic or garlic powder. Then it is roasted slowly, partially submerged in beef stock. Once cooked, the beef is cooled to facilitate slicing; then the thinly sliced meat is bathed in the reheated broth and cooking juices (called au jus, juice, or gravy). To form the sandwiches, forkfuls of the soaked beef are placed inside French bread (cut lengthwise). According to individual preferences, a ladleful of juice may be added (thus served “wet”) or the entire sandwich may be plunged into the juice to soak the bread thoroughly (“dipped”). The traditional additions are hot peppers (giardiniera) and/or sweet peppers (fried or roasted mild bell peppers). The best beef stands prepare the meat and condiments in-house. Beef sandwiches are often eaten along with French fries: many well-regarded stands offer freshly cut, twice-fried potatoes.

Variants of the sandwich include the “combo”: a normal beef to which is added a link of grilled Italian sausage; “cheesy beef”: a normal beef with slices of low-moisture mozzarella or provolone added; “gravy bread” or “soaker”: the bread served without the beef, wet or dipped; and “potato sandwich”: meatless, filled with French fries and dressed with juice.

The bread used for beef sandwiches is the type that old Italian bakeries in Chicago called “French bread” and is distinguished from basic Italian bread in having a longer, narrower shape, thinner crust, and a softer, hole-less crumb. Small- and large-scale Italian bakeries (Turano, Gonnella, and D’Amato’s) are favored sources for this bread.

Though some businesses claim to have invented Italian beef (Al’s, Scala), its origins clearly lie in Italian American home cooking. The key stage in the development of the sandwich was its use in so-called “peanut weddings” (attested from the 1920s). Working-class Italian American families would rent halls and supply their own food for the event, commonly including roasted peanuts and sandwiches filled with slices of wet-roasted beef. Given the volume of food required for such gatherings, families would prepare the beef and often take it to a local Italian bakery for cooking in a large oven, with the bakery supplying the bread. Similar weddings were common elsewhere (New York’s Italian “football weddings” with sub sandwiches), but beef sandwiches are specific to Chicago. Out of this peanut wedding tradition emerged the beef stand business before World War II, mainly in the Taylor Street neighborhood. Parallel to the pizza business, beef stands proliferated greatly after the war, soon gaining popularity outside the Italian American community.

Contributors: Anthony F. Buccini and Michael Stern
See also: Fast Food/Quick Service; Italians

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Italian Ice

Italian Ice, a sweetened frozen dessert made from sugar, water, and fruit (juices, concentrates, or purees), may use artificial colors or flavors. Similar in consistency to sorbet rather than ice cream, it is made by freezing ingredients while mixing them. Italian Ice usually comes in fruit flavors such as lemon, lime, orange, strawberry, cherry, raspberry, and watermelon.

Italian Ice developed from the Italian granita frozen dessert, also a mixture of water, usually fruit flavors, and sugar. Granita has a more crystalline texture than Italian Ice, but varies from region to region in Italy. Native to Sicily, granita is now common in all of Italy. Given the large Sicilian immigration to Chicago, granita morphed into Italian Ice in the early part of the twentieth century.